

## Beirut: The Civil War years

Lebanon gained independence from France in 1943. At the time, Christians held the balance of power and Lebanese Muslims had little say in the running of their country. Tensions between Beirut's Christians and Muslims simmered for years.

After the 1948 Arab-Israeli war over rights to territory in the Middle East, 100,000 Palestinians were evicted from the new state of Israel and poured into Lebanon. Such an influx of (Sunni) Muslim refugees fuelled resentment amongst Lebanese Christians.

In 1975, tensions boiled over. Members of a radical Christian group, the Phalange, attacked and killed a bus full of Palestinians in downtown Beirut. Revenge killings followed, and violence began to spiral out of control. In 1976, Syria sent in 20,000 troops to root out and quash radical Muslim groups on the invitation of the Maronite Christian-led government. In one massacre alone, 2,000 Palestinians were killed.

Fighting between radical Christians and Muslims intensified, and there was a complete breakdown in trust between followers of the two religions. The Lebanese army that was made up of fixed amounts of soldiers from the different faiths collapsed. Gradually Muslim groups retreated into the western half of the city whilst Christians occupied East Beirut.

A 'no man's land' developed between the Christian east and the Muslim west. Grass and plants sprouted amongst the deserted streets in the belt of land that separated the two halves of the city, and it became known as 'the Green Line'. Over time, 'the Green Line' widened and stretched right out into Beirut's suburbs and beyond.



A satellite image showing Beirut's "green line".

In 1982, the Israeli army invaded the city with the aim of removing the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO). The PLO had been set up in 1964 to unite Palestinians in a campaign to fight for a separate homeland. From 1970, they operated out of Palestinian refugee camps in West Beirut and launched attacks against targets in Israel. Israeli forces led bombing raids on PLO-controlled territory, but the PLO retaliated by shelling East Beirut. Eventually, Israeli troops surrounded West Beirut and drove out the PLO. Many thousands died in the fighting.



Israeli forces attack areas along Beirut's seafront ('the Corniche') in 1982.

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Lebanon's civil war was never simply a battle between Christians and Muslims. Different groups formed their own armies or 'militias' as they tried to seize control of different neighbourhoods, often pitching Muslims against Muslims, and Christians against Christians.

Anarchy ruled for many years. Members of the PLO, led by Sunni Muslims, fought against the Hizbollah, a Shia Muslim group backed by Iran and Syria, to control neighbourhoods in West Beirut. In East Beirut, Syrian troops clashed with the Christian Phalange militia, who had formed an alliance with the invading Israelis. Another group, the Druze, were neither Muslim nor Christian. From 1983, the Druze militia clashed with Maronite Christians in the eastern half of the city.

Westerners were victims of the civil war too. In October 1983, suicide bombers - thought to be members of the Hizbollah - killed 241 American marines who were part of an international peacekeeping force. Up to September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, this was the most deadly terrorist attack ever on American citizens. Another bomb in the city killed 58 French paratroopers. In the late 1980s Muslim militia groups began taking hostages, including Western foreigners. Hostages like John McCarthy and Terry Waite from the UK, and Brian Keenan from Ireland, spent years in captivity.

Despite continued fighting, a peace deal was signed between Lebanese leaders in 1989 offering an equal balance between Christians and Muslims in a new Lebanese parliament. Within a year, most of the militias had disbanded. In southern Lebanon fighting between the Hizbollah and the occupying Israelis continued for another ten years, but a fragile peace returned to the streets of Beirut.

Between 150,000-200,000 people died during the civil war. Another 300,000 were wounded, nearly a quarter of the population left the country, and for years Beirut's economy was paralysed.

Divisions and hostilities are fading on either side of the 'Green Line', and Beirut has earned itself the title, "the city that would not die". Since 1990, a massive re-building programme has seen Beirut gradually restore itself to its former glory.

### Main religious groups in Beirut

Christian (Maronite and Phalange)

Druze

Muslim (Shi'a or Shi'ite and Sunni)

... in total there are about 17 sub-groups with their own religious beliefs.